The Labors of Michael Jackson: Virtuosity, Deindustrialization, and Dancing Work

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Neverland could never have happened without Gary [Indiana].
—Denise Jordan Walker, tour guide (qtd. in Rousseau)

Automatic, Systematic / Full of color, self-contained / Tuned and gentle to your vibe
—The Jackson 5 ("Dancing Machine")

BY ANY OBJECTIVE CRITERION, MICHAEL JACKSON IS THE CLOSEST thing to a consensual virtuoso performer that late-twentieth-century popular culture produced. Sales figures, fans' affective investments, the acclaim of virtuosic peers, the foundational contributions and innovations for which he is credited—all attest to his command of the central paradox intrinsic to virtuosity: the ability to appear path-breakingly original in a way that is collectively obvious. Further, if all virtuosity can be described as "precarious excellence," Jackson's was more precarious than most: veering spectacularly from an indefinably pleasurable surplus (more talented, more charismatic, more "something" than his brothers) to equally indefinable and untoward excesses (too many strange stunts, too many surgeries and antics with boys, too much of too much).[1] The narrative arc of his virtuosity was always already entangled in multiple overlapping narratives of difference, including raced and gendered histories of American popular performance, the possibilities and limits of the mutable self, the bedrock or millstone of family, the pleasures and perils of spectacle, and the permissions and constraints of celebrity. These narratives have been picked apart in the popular press and, to a lesser degree, in the academy, while another issue remains largely unexamined: the relationship between Jackson's virtuosity and the

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changing political economy of American work. Scholars have commented on Jackson's discomfiting ability to straddle multiple binaries: man/woman, gay/straight, black/white, child/man.[2] Yet one underlying binary remains unremarked except, as the first epigraph indicates, by those in his hometown: that of Gary/Neverland—the seeming fixity of industrialization versus the neither-here-nor-there fluidity of neoliberal globalization or, in broader terms, Zygmunt Bauman's "solid" versus "liquid modernity" (6–8). Jackson's virtuosity cannot be understood apart from these conditions.

Jackson's virtuosity as a dancer at the height of his career reveals a neglected aspect of virtuosity in dance more generally: its highly allegorical, nostalgic activation of imagined, idealized relationships between the body and work abandoned by the relentless motility of capital, allowing audiences to view these vanishing modes with a romantic, backward glance. Some dance techniques generate this nostalgia by mystifying these relationships. Ballet soloists, for example, beckon spectators with the phantasmic possibility of artisanal ownership of one's own labor through efforts so exceptional and so sublime they transcend even gravity. Jackson's virtuosity does not work in this way, though it does include its own specific appeal to transcendence, about which I say more below. His particular virtuosity triggers nostalgia for a vanishing industrial past in ways best understood through the trope of the human motor, while only barely containing the multiple contradictions and exclusions endemic to the industrial modernist project, especially those around race. This trope is set in motion by the intersection of his movement vocabulary and key elements in the narrative construction of his celebrity, especially as these appear in his autobiography, *Moonwalk* (1988). Understanding Jackson's virtuosity as the performative activation of industrial nostalgia allows us to make sense of some puzzling critical responses to his dancing and offers new insights into relationships between dance and work in the last half of the twentieth century.

This essay examines selected performances from 1983 to 1988, the height of Jackson's dance career—the short films (the term he preferred to *video*) *Thriller* and *Smooth Criminal* and his performance on the televised anniversary celebration *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever*—as well as the autobiography, which serves as the rhetorical underpinning of his virtuoso narrative. I begin by discussing the key factors that positioned Jackson as a potent cultural actor during this period: the relational economy of virtuosity leading to affective investment in the exceptional performer, the allegorical potential of dance to illuminate other forms of labor, and the complex intersections of race, performance, and industrial modernity that prefigured him and persist in his repertoire. From a theoretical and historical background, I turn to analyses of Jackson's dances and movement vocabulary.

Virtuous and Virtuosic Work

Dancing is work: a job, the product of labor. It is also allegorical: a "mix of making and reading" regimes of work "combined in one" (Fletcher 10). This dual status makes dancers significant, if largely unrecognized, rhetorical actors in public imaginings of bodies and work. Bodies in motion offer visible, potent templates for imagining ways work is produced and consumed. Virtuoso performers illuminate these dynamics with special intensity.

Three aspects of virtuoso performance contribute to its critical slipperiness. First, its definitional precision is inversely proportional to its seeming self-evidence. Audiences know it when they see it, and what they see challenges referentiality while inviting a veritable mash-up of metaphors. Virtuosos are "angels," "devils," "heroes," "monsters," "magicians," and "machines," sometimes all at

once.[3] As these images suggest, virtuosos are human, but not quite: they are something else, something more than the sum of their merely human parts, and definitions strain to capture both the performer's humanity and this peculiar excess. The term *virtuoso* migrated from Romantic classical concert music. Critical histories of virtuosity often begin with the violinist Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840), whose performances enraptured audiences and led peers to proclaim themselves "already dead," so great was the perceived gulf between his talent and their own (Brandstetter 178). David Palmer uses Paganini as the paradigm case for defining virtuosity as "the art of incredible skill which displays a heightened sense of self-expression, evokes a distinctive affecting presence and transforms ways of viewing human agency" (345), to which Brandstetter, also using Paganini, adds the exceptional "charisma" projected by the performer (178).[4]

Second, definitions of virtuosity are most effectively operationalized in comparisons with nonvirtuosos. Jackson's performance with his brothers as the reunited Jackson 5 at the televised celebration of Motown's twenty-fifth anniversary is illustrative. Jackson sang "Billy Jean" and introduced the moonwalk at this concert, but his solo effort was preceded by the group's rendition of Jackson 5 hits. Michael is clearly the front man, though the medley features shared choreography. Many of his moves seem almost throwaway—time-keeping or rhythmic punctuation—but are executed with a precision and vehemence rendered more compelling and eye-catching against the comparative docility and rootedness of his brothers. He inserts rapid-fire corkscrew kicks and effortless close-legged spins almost gratuitously. The casualness with which the spins are tossed off belies their tightness and smoothness: he looks as if he is on ice while his brothers are weighted down. In line formations, he is visibly more taut and, simultaneously, very loose-jointed. His hip thrusts are sharper, his dimestops (complete pauses, usually transitions between moves) more abrupt, and his crouches with turned-in knees so extreme they are almost grotesque. Yet these moves resolve so quickly into other steps that the group choreography seems utterly staid by comparison, and this underscores Michael's virtuosity even further. His dancing is so superior to his brothers' that he seems to physically enact the group's inability to contain him (Jackson 5, "Motown Medley").

Finally, though virtuosity presents itself as a quality of exceptional individuals, it is a relational economy—relational in more ways than in one performer's surpassing of an accompanying ensemble. It does not operate apart from communally sanctioned ideals of appropriate, even virtuous, display, and this is the source of the virtuoso's power as an allegorical cultural actor. "Knowing it when seeing it" is recognition of the preexisting consensual template for reading the performer's seemingly effortless effort and the audience's affective responses, conjured by the performance. This template binds the audience to the performer, inviting attachment, identification, and desire across some dimensions of difference—for example, gender and race—while performatively reinforcing others, which are then coded as "talent" or "genius." Simply put, virtuosity is a recognizable plot into which audiences set an exceptionally skilled, charismatic performer. It organizes their own attachments and longings by projecting these onto, then enabling them to consume, others' bodies on stage. Virtuosity alerts audiences to the noteworthy aspects of such bodies (both virtuous work and the transcendence of it) and to "appropriate" feelings about them (identification as well as alienation). Virtuosos incarnate "plots of possibility" for audiences—seeming mastery of one's own labor and the affective surplus it generates—even while demonstrating the audiences' inability to activate these plots themselves. They are objects of both attraction and

anxiety simultaneously: reassuring and disturbing (Hamera 42). In the public sphere, their successful performances pull together affect and efficient work so that these appear to coalesce naturally into ideologically potent plots of virtuous, visible labor and its equally virtuous consumption.

Virtuosity as a relational economy is particularly complex in popular performance, in which communal ideals of virtuous labor circulate within frames of reference more elastic than classical concert music and dance. Consider the case of the saxophonist Kenny G., who, the musicologist Rob Walser asserts, "is in fact a virtuoso of a particular kind. His intonation is flawless, even on the treacherous alto sax. He plays flurries of notes with tremendous technical precision. He controls his instruments perfectly, doing with them exactly what he wants to. He plays ornaments on his ornaments, with nuances on his nuances" (34). Yet, despite his popularity, Kenny G. is also reviled, particularly by jazz aficionados, who seem to delight in imagining his demise. For these detractors, Kenny G. is not virtuous enough. He violates jazz norms of "finding music" through "struggle" (36). The jazz virtuoso should be more hero than magician, more devil than angel. Walser argues that "violent reactions to [his] music . . . surely betray a widespread cultural discomfort with, even contempt for, sensitivity" (37). This virtuoso reassures too easily and too well: Kenny G.'s perceived excessive emotionalism is too much, while his effortless effort is not enough. He is too problematic an object for identification, at least for one potential fan base, to earn his virtuosity.

As a dancer, Michael Jackson demonstrates the exceptional skill, self-evident, almost fantastic agency, charisma, and transcendence of nonvirtuosic peers common to all virtuosos. Yet his dancing is too often dismissed, in part because it falls between the conventions of popular and concert dance that define virtuous work in performance. Virtuosity in concert dance is most obvious at the ends of a continuum of labor visibility: battles with technique that are clearly battles and position the artist as hero, as in athletic *butoh*, or those in which the technique is so overmatched by the performer that it looks easy, as in ballet or tap, which positions the artist to be read as angel, magician, or machine. In popular dance, virtuosity is most recognizable in athletic, spectacular, "difficult" moves that are, at the same time, strongly narrative and highly emotional. Jackson's virtuosity is subtler and more complex. He combines exceptional musicality, precise execution, and a repertoire that draws from so many genres it is best described as "polycorporeal" with recurring invocations of hard work belied by the apparent effortlessness of his performances. Conventional virtuoso dancers make visibly difficult moves look easy; Jackson takes deceptively simple steps and complicates them in performance. His virtuosity is a function of his execution of these moves, not any inherent complexity of the moves themselves.

Critics of his dancing often miss the virtuosity of his execution—the actual work he does in performance—defaulting instead to presumptions about originality and spectacular difficulty putatively intrinsic to particular steps. For example, in an otherwise laudatory essay Joan Acocella observes that Jackson "didn't have a lot of moves. You can almost count them on your fingers. . . . He created very little dancing that was different from his own prior numbers, or anyone else's." She concludes that in his short films "dance is tertiary, even quaternary. . . . Jackson didn't value his dancing enough" (77). Likewise, Peggy Phelan describes him as a "captivating (albeit relatively narrow) dancer," while noting his "two-step, the double gesture of appropriating and transforming" other artists' moves (944). But to fully grasp the complexity of Jackson's virtuosity and its allegorical relationship to the changing nature of American work, it is important to read the specific dynamics of his

performances, as well as to probe the precise point where "narrowness" and polycorporeal appropriations meet in performance.

Jackson's movement vocabulary was relatively small, though his repertoire became richer and more complex over the period considered here. The moves in *Thriller* (1983) and in his performance of "Billy Jean" at the Motown twenty-fifth-anniversary concert (1983) are simpler than those in *Smooth Criminal* (1988), one reason the first two are more frequently reproduced by fans. Taken together, these three performances represent the range of his dancing at the height of his career. He makes extensive use of his knees, especially Charleston-informed moves from turned in to turned out, as well as isolations, quick corkscrew kicks, closed-leg spins, pelvic thrusts, toe stands, variations on the electric slide, and standing struts. He pops and locks his joints, juxtaposing these against seemingly weightless glides. He also makes extensive use of "the robot" and variants, and of the dimestop. These elements are not difficult in and of themselves. Indeed, in *Smooth Criminal*, they are reproduced, albeit not nearly as well, by one of the children spying on Jackson in the film's nightclub setting. His virtuosity comes from the interrelationship of his musicality and the sharpness of his attack. Jackson seemed proud of this dimension of his performance style, underscoring the point by invoking Fred Astaire, who reportedly called him "a *hell* of a mover" (qtd. in Jackson, *Moonwalk* 213).

As Margo Jefferson aptly observed, Jackson's moves, particularly his quick changes of weight, are both "liquid and percussive" (87). He is able to forcefully insert half and quarter steps while visibly working within, not against, the music. He is also extraordinarily clean, even while extremely fast. His lean line emphasizes that every strut and kick is sharp and fully stretched, completed to the tips of his toes. In rapid-fire combinations, his precision, especially his articulate management of his joints and his feet, makes him readily discernible from others in the ensembles he leads or in crowd scenes when neither his face nor his costume is fully visible. He also displays an impressive ability to clearly present contrasting moves in the same choreographic phrase. *Thriller* is an interesting case in point. In an early scene, when he and Ola Ray skip from the theater toward their eventual zombie encounter, Jackson's liquid, almost weightless skips make his stiff-armed zombie walks seconds later seem so extreme and, therefore, so playful. His dance with his zombie chorines begins with isolations on beat, then switches to quick pelvic gyrations: a simple physical passage that is challenging to execute with the requisite sharpness, as demonstrated by hundreds of Jackson's flash-mob imitators. A few of his moves, like his forward lean and hyperspin in *Smooth Criminal*, were enabled by special effects. But these effects-assisted moves differ from the rest only in degree, not in quality: a bit more extreme, but exhibiting the same intricate coupling of grace and vehement precision that characterizes Jackson's dance in this period.

Romantic constructions of virtuosity obscure the mechanics of creative production: hence the mystifications of the performing "angel" or "magician." In contrast, Jackson routinely exposed the very labors that virtuosic dance—and his particular percussive liquidity—generally conceal, disrupting conventional visual equations of economy of input yielding spectacular output. Efficiency and precision in performance are always described as work. Jackson insisted on narrating the labor involved, even in rare moments when he "let the dance create itself," as he did when he choreographed the moonwalk for his performance of "Billie Jean" on *Motown 25* (*Moonwalk* 210). Yet even here, as if to emphasize that no dance really creates itself, he also highlighted his efforts as a choreographer for the same show in ensemble numbers with his brothers that he "choreographed and

rehearsed . . . for *days*" (208). Jackson never colluded in the rhetorical consignment of his virtuosity to the ephemerality of talent; it was always produced through repetitive hard work. Most important, he did not improvise in performance; he consistently deployed the vocabulary of choreography and rehearsal as a way of establishing the labor pedigree of his dances. In so doing, Jackson exposed the unseen work of virtuoso performance—the labors that defined him by, in his view, erasing his childhood—and aggressively intervened in the stereotype of African Americans as "natural" dancers. He writes, "Black people are truly innovative dancers; they create many of the new dances pure and simple" (210). The agency articulated in the terms "innovative" and "create" challenges racist dismissal of African American dancers as mere imitators of European culture just as Jackson's adult invocations of hard work foreclose a priori attribution of his abilities to either "genes" or "genius" (Gottschild 110). On the rare occasions when he presents himself as a uniquely gifted dancer, it is not as a choreographer, nor as an instinctual artist, but rather as a quick study (*Moonwalk* 136).

In addition to his physical facility and discipline, Jackson's virtuosity is inextricably linked to place and race: the socioeconomic landscapes from which it emerged or, as the popular mythos has it, the places from and to which he "escaped." He was a child of the American industrial heartland, born in the steel-mill town of Gary, Indiana, and molded in the self-consciously Fordist studios of Detroit's Hitsville, U.S.A.: Motown. His repeated references to his childhood as a nonstop regimen of rehearsals and performances lay the narrative groundwork authorizing his virtuosity as something other than talent, charisma, or luck. This was not simply the dancer's pleasure of practice, though Jackson does write about his love of performing. Even so, from a very young age, he argues, he was another working stiff who did not and could not control his own labor. In *Moonwalk* he writes, "I was reminded of that old song by Clarence Carter called 'Patches,' where the oldest son is asked to take care of the farm after his father dies and his mother tells him she's depending on him. Well, we weren't sharecroppers and I wasn't the oldest, but those were slim shoulders on which to place such burdens" (150). Jackson's repeated references to the burdens of his childhood and the image of the sharecropper, albeit disavowed, underscore the black body's very specific and intimate relationship to oppressive regimes of work. Jayna Brown notes that this relationship was embodied by a much earlier generation of black child performers crossing the country, and the ocean, over a century before Jackson took the stage with new versions of some of their moves.[5] For Jackson this was a matter very close to home.

Michael Jackson was the driven son of a driven father. Joseph Jackson, Michael's father, was a crane operator for U.S. Steel and an R & B guitarist. In *Moonwalk*, he seems much more of a shift boss. Both father's and son's escapes from alienating regimes of work required strict adherence to more of the same: slowly building capital through "overtime" rehearsals and performances, the equivalent of second and third shifts to refine routines with Taylorist precision.[6] Reference to the sharecropper aside, Jackson's family was itself a site of industrial (re)production: a factory turning out professional entertainers. In Michael's account, Joseph's demands for productivity in this arrangement unrelentingly trumped the unstructured pleasures of childhood. In this regard, the Jackson family dynamic resonates powerfully with Robin D. G. Kelley's observations about the effects of racist, exploitative labor practices in black working-class families. He writes that these families

> were sites for internal conflicts as well as key institutions for sustaining a sense of community and solidarity. If patriarchal families are,

> at the very least, a system by which exploited male wage earners control and exploit the labor of women and children, then one would presumably find a material basis for a good deal of intrafamily conflict, and perhaps an array of resistance strategies, all framed within an ideology that justifies the subordinate status of women and children. (36)

The trope of the family as locus of production was repeated when Jackson and his brothers signed with Motown, whose corporate dynamic operated through a rhetorical sleight of hand that shifted between business and family, most notably in the uncanny ability of Berry Gordy, the company's founder, to operate as pater familias and factory boss. Gordy had in fact worked at the Ford Wayne Assembly Plant and spoke explicitly about the assembly line as Motown's production model (Smith 14). This same tropic intertwining of family and factory circulated through the vernacular of American industrial modernity: union members were "brothers" and a corporation like General Motors was a "generous mother." The trope also recalls other sites where black bodies, the family, and (re)production as work were intimately linked, including the "family" of a plantation, where, as Hortense Spillers writes, "fathers could and did sell their sons and daughters" (qtd. in Brown, *Babylon Girls* 24), and troupes of black performers that were literal families (e.g., the Whitman Sisters) or metaphorical ones.

Jackson's virtuosity is inextricably tied to working-class credentials forged through both his own labors and those of his father. He observed, "A part of my earliest memories is my father's job working in the steel mill. It was tough, mind-numbing work and he played music for escape" (*Moonwalk* 8). In underscoring his class background, Jackson made members of the working class generally, and the black working class in particular, visible as creative cultural actors in the hegemonic American public sphere. This was in itself a meaningful intervention, as the normative working body of American industrialization was presumptively white and heteronormatively male. Jackson would not trouble the latter attribute until later in his career, but his insistence on recognition of his labor pedigree challenged typical representations of black life as bimodal (elites versus the multigenerational poor), even as it challenged virtuosity as magically produced (Pitts 99). It also performatively refuted the "sneering references" to black workers as lazy that "typified the manner in which whites could still use Blacks as a counterpoint to come to terms with their own acceptance of steady and even regimented labor" (Roedinger 180).

In his own "escape" from Gary to Neverland, Jackson seemed to incarnate the promise of Fordist labor, one rendered retrospectively simpler, more desirable, and more egalitarian by the emerging economic dislocations of deindustrialization. He could parlay the discipline and sweat equity of the mill and the assembly line into virtuosic class mobility. Of course there are multiple ironies here. First, as noted above, he could embody a generic American industrial imaginary that in fact consolidated itself through the exclusion and exploitation of black workers. Second, his father's insistence on flawless execution and his own perfectionism positioned Jackson within what Paolo Virno calls "servile virtuosity," a defining mode of post-Fordism characterized by, among other things, the imperative to be excellent all the time as the only bulwark against one's own dispensability (196).[7] Finally, Jackson could only embody a longing for this vanishing industrial past because he so completely escaped it. From the 1970s through the period covered here, he was the Horatio Alger of the moment at which industrialization's putative promises were morphing into something else: something seemingly more precarious, more Darwinian. Indeed, the entire arc of Jackson's career parallels the dismantling of this very industrial infrastructure; both accelerated in the 1980s.

Relocated to "Neverland" in California, later in his career and in a period not covered in this essay, he could no longer embody both the virtuous results of industrial discipline and escape from it. Instead, he seemingly enacted the flighty irresponsibility of capital itself, increasingly deterritorializing his earlier, carefully wrought relationships between effort and visibility, uncoupling the labors of celebrity from the work of performance. In this new iteration, the body of the performer came to stand in for the *absence* of his own labor and exposed the very corporeal and socioeconomic incommensurabilities of production, consumption, and visibility that virtuosity was supposed to reconcile. He himself became an object of nostalgic longing: where was the Michael Jackson of *Thriller*?

Punched Out

Jackson's virtuosity cannot be understood outside the economic moment that produced him. Daniel Bell may have optimistically viewed the "post-industrial society" as a quasi-evolutionary outgrowth of earlier formations, but, as a brief review of American deindustrialization indicates, it was neither inevitable nor accidental. The 1970s saw gradual erosion in the importance of industrial policy, particularly regarding manufacturing, over against the rise of trade to support the economies of strategic Cold War allies. These allies, particularly in Western Europe and Japan, quickly became competitors, further undermining job security for American workers in the domestic manufacturing sector. During this period, the United States "replace[d] the assumptions that capital and labor should prosper together with an ethic claiming that the promotion of capital will eventually benefit labor—trading factories for finance" (Stein, *Pivotal Decade* xii). The steel industry that employed Joseph Jackson was at the very center of this change, as it was for every major sociopolitical transition in the postwar United States.

Several key events and policy decisions led to the steel industry's systemic decline, which is illustrative of the larger trajectory of deindustrialization. In 1973, one year after the release of Jackson's first solo album, *Got to Be There*, the OPEC oil embargo and subsequent dramatic increases in fuel prices touched off a pernicious global recession, coupled with high inflation, from which the developed world was slow to emerge. The economic malaise persisted through the mid-1970s. President Jimmy Carter, fearing "the fragility of the world, not the U.S. economy," and ardently committed to "reduc[ing] inflation, where steel always played a role," forcefully advanced policies favoring steel imports despite accusations of foreign—particularly Japanese—dumping (Stein, *Running Steel* 234). Meanwhile, as the domestic industry suffered, the Export-Import Bank of the United States was providing a multimillion-dollar loan to a South Korean company to finance a new steel mill in South Korea.

The results of these policies were devastating and appeared very quickly. In September 1977, over 2,500 workers at U.S. Steel in Gary were ruled eligible for "trade adjustment assistance": benefits for those "who believe they have been or will become unemployed due to increased imports" ("U.S."). Judith Stein estimates that in August and September alone at least twenty thousand domestic steel jobs were lost as mills closed across the country (*Running Steel* 235). By the end of October, industry earnings were plummeting; U.S. Steel's dropped by almost seventy-six percent in the third quarter (Salpukas). In December George Meany, AFL-CIO president, blasted the Carter administration's trade policies, arguing, "Free trade is a joke and a myth. And a Government trade policy predicated on old ideas of free trade is worse than a joke—it is a prescription for disaster" (Flint). He singled out the steel industry as particularly imperiled.

This systemic drive to deindustrialization reached its apogee (or nadir) under President

Ronald Reagan, elected in 1980. Reagan "[r]educed taxes on capital, dismantled business regulations, privileged the fight against inflation, tolerated high unemployment, fought unions, promoted an expensive dollar, and championed free trade. His policies altered the composition of the U.S. economy. They promoted financial services and real estate and injured manufacturing" (Stein, *Pivotal Decade* 263). Membership in private-sector unions plummeted, spurred on by Reagan's wholesale firing of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association after a job walkout in 1981, which created a ripple effect that strengthened employer resistance to employee labor actions across the country. Wage packages shrank, labor costs were driven down, and no palliative jobs programs were offered. African American families were profoundly affected. Rising incomes and falling poverty rates, particularly between 1967 and 1973, had halted and, in hard-hit rust-belt economies, reversed. Unemployment rates for black workers were devastatingly high (Pitts 101). In this atmosphere of rising inequality and job uncertainty, Fordist labor conditions began to look like the good old days and Jackson offered a reassuring spectacle: both the triumph of and the triumph over the human motor through the hard physical work, precision, and efficiency emblematic of industrial glories now clearly vanishing.

Dancing Machine

Automatic, Systematic

In his precise attack, preternatural cleanness and speed, explicitly mechanistic movement vocabulary, and recurring invocations of repetitive work, Jackson both incarnates and transcends the trope of the human motor, combining the virtuoso's seemingly mechanical exactitude with suprahuman charisma. Anson Rabinbach argues that this trope is "a paradigm of social modernity" linking "expanded output, greater work performance, and more energetic workers" to social reform through metaphors drawn from thermodynamics and a larger "science of work," including Taylorism (293). Popular performance was central to the domestication of the trope. The Fordist production model that supplanted Taylorism as the paradigmatic integration of worker and machine was praised in dancerly terms with the noise of the assembly line as the score.[8] The new model was, as Ezra Pound put it, "an experiment in tempo" that provided the "swing and exuberance which would increase production" (qtd. in McCarren 134).[9]

Concert and popular dance simultaneously domesticated and resisted American industrialization in its most pivotal decades. Whether "internalizing the machine into the body" through biomechanics exercises and "machine ballets" or challenging Taylorized economies of gesture through "exotic" displays of heightened affect in the modern dances of Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, amateur and professional dancers provided generative strategies for organizing bodies and imagining alternative structures of physical productivity and primitivity (McCarren 130).[10] The chorus girl was especially evocative of connections between dance and industrial work, and black dance moves were central to her allegorical potential. As Brown observes, the chorine incarnated both "industrial capitalism's disciplinary claims on the (white) body's time and energies and the . . . potential freedom and pleasures technological innovation was making possible" in urban centers (*Babylon Girls* 5).[11] Black dance vocabularies were key components of the repertoire across the color line: "Dance techniques developed by African American women vitalized the white dance instructor's choreography" of chorus routines (169). Brown argues that nostalgia for vanished modes of production from the "primitive," preindustrial past was read onto or against black popular dancers by both black and white audiences,

particularly in the Depression era, when "[b]lack nostalgia, the desired return to a simpler time, ran alongside white romanticized versions of the black folk" (194).[12] Half a century later Jackson would also evoke nostalgia at a moment of economic crisis, this time for the "simpler" life of the industrial worker.

In both the Taylorist and the Fordist scenarios, the exemplary human motor combined speed, efficiency, the minimum gestural range deemed necessary, the illusion of overcoming fatigue, and visibly high productivity. Jackson presented all five qualities united in and as virtuoso performance. He made the human motor lyric, beautiful, and personally expressive. But, in his testaments to the hard physical labor of performance, he also challenged romantic construction of the virtuoso as perfect human motor by insisting that dance was actually work, not the transcendence of it. He also challenged its presumed whiteness, as discussed below. Further, his laborious virtuosity was contagious. As his countless imitators demonstrate, audiences are not content simply to watch him. They consume and reproduce him at the level of their own musculature, making Jackson both a motor and a generator.

The trope of the human motor also invites reconsideration of Jackson's pacing and his rejection of consistent full-body shots for quick edits that isolate parts of the dancing body. Across his repertoire, Jackson performs quick combinations, pauses, then executes others. The pauses are complete—he is perfectly still—but they are also tensive: not relaxed, but poised for reactivation. The effect recalls William Faulkner's observation that "the cost of electricity was not in the actual time the light burned but in the retroactive overcoming of primary inertia when the switch was snapped" (88). Though Jackson never conveys inertia on stage, he does demonstrate absolute command of the energy needed to repeatedly snap the switch. Unlike "the master," Fred Astaire, who favored full-body shots, Jackson used editing to underscore his pacing despite its fragmentation of the dancing body; this choice is at the root of Acocella's charge that he "didn't value his dancing enough" (77). But this assessment ignores both the relationship between editing and his phrase-pause-phrase rhythm and the importance of isolations in his dancing.

Smooth Criminal is an interesting example. Midway through the film, the tempo slows dramatically as Jackson begins to moan, the ensemble moves as if in a collective trance, and a black cat walks across piano keys—its discordant notes underscore the surrealism of the scene. In succession, Jackson nods, only his head moving rhythmically up and down visible in the frame; snaps his fingers in a close-up of his hand; stamps his right foot in a full-body shot; and repeatedly flexes his right arm upward in a shot of his upper body. The tight and long shots have the same effect: they underline each isolation within an erotic yet stylized sequence. Even when combinations do not contain such obvious isolations, as in the *Thriller* zombie dances in which shots often focus on Jackson's upper body, the editing directs the viewer to specific gestures (shoulder raises, in this case), inviting recognition of larger relations between a percussive part and the flow of the whole. This editing strategy emphasizes that precise, "narrow" gestures are the drivers making the entire dance go in ways that parallel the relationship between the Fordist worker's production moves and the overall flow of the assembly line.

Jackson was not unique in his ability to embody the human motor in performance. As McCarren notes, mechanistic elements are now commonplace in popular and concert dance: increasingly prominent hip-hop vocabularies "embody the drive and frenzy of automation, of robots . . . the fragmented gestures of the assembly line and time clock" (193). The ubiquity of mechanistic movement at a decidedly post-Fordist moment is an interesting development in the light of two interrelated

historical trajectories, one pointing forward and the other backward. The first involves the progressive marginalization of American concert dance in public discourse throughout the twentieth century and into the present. McCarren argues that the "interpretive grid of modern industry" sidelined concert dance as a generative cultural metaphor (5). It became increasingly peripheral to discourses about embodiment in industrial and postindustrial modernity.[13] Indeed, the critical neglect and misreading of Jackson's dancing (as opposed to the structures of his celebrity) are symptoms of this marginalization.

But Jackson's virtuosic execution of the human motor in ways that now appear in mainstream concert dance also gestures backward to the early decades of industrialization—specifically, to the intersection of public performance and social and economic change in this period. In *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class*, David Savran documents the rising anxiety around the "Fordized human subject," both white- and blue-collar, who, in the 1920s, had been "transformed into an extension, simulacrum, or machine" (139). While the pleasures of precision were modeled by the chorus line, Savran notes that "cultural critics consistently displaced their anxieties about an exhilarating, frightening Machine Age" onto another mode of popular performance: jazz. Jazz was a "maddeningly monotonous music" that "had passed through the stereotyping machine to emerge as standard jazz-finished one-steps, as tinny and characterless and undistinguished as a school of Fords" (139–40). There was a strong undercurrent of racial anxiety in this jazz aversion, exemplified by the pains so many took to excise blacks from the idiom. George Gershwin, for example, "aimed to dispel the 'superstition that jazz is essentially Negro'" (71). The excision of blackness is another hallmark of the connection between jazz and the industrial imaginary: both depended on whitening the means of production. When jazz dancers put "jazz music in motion" during this period (Malone 91), it impelled whites to literally follow in the footsteps of black artists who originated the moves.[14] Sixty years later, Jackson's virtuosity both challenged the putative whiteness of that industrial imaginary and answered charges that he and his jazz antecedents were either characterless and limited or undisciplined primitives. He used moves drawn from jazz dance and jazz dancers to revive a sanitized version of the promise of that now vanishing age, even as manufacturing jobs chased increasingly globalized cheap labor to be replaced by lower-wage service jobs when they were replaced at all.

Automatic, systematic: Jackson's dancing romanticized the seamless fusion of dancer and/as machine, one "tuned and gentle to your vibe," fluidity always working within, not against, his percussive phrasings. In so doing, he recast the trope of the human motor itself as a site of nostalgic longing. Fordist mechanization viewed retrospectively through the anxieties of deindustrialization was not standardized racist wage slavery but a race-neutral vehicle for self-expression and mobility, just as Motown, modeled on the Ford assembly line, conveyed the Jacksons out of the inferno of Gary's steel mills to a phantasmic place of control over their labor: neverland indeed.[15]

Full of Color

Of course the trope of the human motor has a far older and darker history: mechanization effectively replaced slave labor, America's "other" human motor. Indeed, it is possible to argue that industrialization's human motor whitened manual labor and, in turn, the American ethnic groups most likely to embrace factory work as a tool of social mobility. This human motor, coupled with the racialized history of American industrialization and its unraveling, demands acknowledgment

of Jackson's mastery of polycorporeality over against claims that he is a narrow dancer.

Simply put, Jackson's dances conjure many bodies: those of African American performers well-known and unknown and their high-profile white counterparts. His moves quote Josephine Baker, Cab Calloway, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, James Brown, Jackie Wilson, and anonymous street dancers, to name only a few sources.[16] The number of steps in his repertoire may be small, but the histories, choreographic strategies, and performance styles he draws on are anything but.[17] In this sense, Jackson is not a narrow dancer but a synecdochal one: the visible parts of his performances invite recognition of a much larger and more diverse corpus.

Thus, Jackson did more than invoke and lyricize a nostalgically idealized human motor and, with it, an entire mode of production. He also reminded his audiences that this motor was "full of color" all along: performatively tricking back on the racist exclusions of black workers from the promises and rewards of industrialization by drawing on tropes of African American performance going back a hundred years. Industries like steel and auto, which in a sense birthed Michael Jackson, drew willing black workers from the American South to Gary and Detroit throughout the middle of the twentieth century. Over fifteen percent of the region's black population migrated to work in steel during the 1950s (Stein, *Running Steel* 39). These workers were met with systemic racism from management and unions across industrial sites; seniority systems kept them out of top jobs and affirmed racial hierarchies. Institutionalized discrimination was challenged from below—with, for example, the formation of counter-unions like the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement in Detroit, in 1968—and from above, as in a 1974 consent decree between the federal government, the steelworkers' union, and the steel industry that provided plant seniority for all. The results, however, were negated by American policies sacrificing domestic manufacturing for trade and finance. To add insult to economic injury, in a repudiation of black workers' battles to secure equal access to well-paying industry jobs, Stein points out that institutional racism led to actively blaming victims of these policies for their effects: "During the 1960s, the nation attributed black unemployment to racism; during the 1980s, black unemployment came to be seen as a preference for idleness. . . . In both eras, racial ideology mystified the sources of black unemployment . . . ," effectively concealing the systemic redirection of capital to nonmanufacturing sectors (321).

Jackson's activation and transcendence of the trope of the human motor positioned him as an agent within an industrial imaginary that never wanted to include him. Moreover, by invoking movements drawn directly from the African American dance repertoire, he performatively integrated the presumed whiteness of these industrial mechanisms, inserting bodily comportments that racist infrastructure tried first to exclude and then to pathologize. During this period, he deftly played both sides of virtuosity's rhetoric of transcendence. Still recognizable as a black man during this period, Jackson could both perform readable racial identity as a black working body and invoke the extraordinary artist's putative demographic transcendence using a tactical double positioning reproduced in movement. His transitions from splaying knees to multiple spins emphasized mastery of vocabularies popularly regarded as both racially particular and universal, dancing both together in ways industrialization never would, all the while performatively refuting racist charges of idleness and reduction to "nature" (versus discipline and "culture").

Modernity has always loved its ruins, and postindustrial modernity is no exception. Images of abandoned, crumbling factories in American rust-belt cities now circulate as

disaster porn, feeding a voyeuristic fascination with scenes of underclass decay. Popular response to Jackson's virtuosity has followed the same trajectory; it has also come to rest on morbid fascination coupled with nostalgia. I suspect the physicality for which he is most remembered is not his dancing but his changing face. In a video setting these shifting tectonics of Jackson's face to sinister music, the viewer is finally confronted with a question just as applicable to the shattered industrial infrastructure and equally shattered neighborhoods of Gary or Detroit: "If this is what's happening outside, what's going on inside?" (*Morphing*). Jackson's virtuosic activation of the human motor offered a fantasy of unalienated labor in an industrial modernity that was and never was. It could be mastered through hard work, activated as an aesthetic of personal and racial agency, and even become, potentially, emancipatory. Ultimately, though, the increasingly global flow of capital was itself a hell of a mover and Jackson, no longer publicly dancing, too much an embodiment of its irresponsible caprices and the devastating aftereffects of its failures. By the time of Jackson's death in 2009, his American audience was already consigned to neoliberal neverland, left to the tender mercies of some very smooth criminals in a postmanufacturing age.

Notes

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1. The formulation "virtuosity as precarious excellence" was developed by Brandstetter, Brandl-Risi, and Eikels in the context of the research project "Scenes of Virtuosity," part of the Collaborative Research Center's larger project "Cultures of the Performative," at the Freie Universität Berlin. It captures both the constraints of economized, post-Fordist virtuosity and the seemingly structural instability in the concept of virtuosity itself: "Virtuoso performances do not subject their value to generally binding social structures of productivity. . . . This very individuality and display of self-will has also made virtuoso performers suspicious in the eyes of their contemporaries" (Brandstetter, Brandl-Risi, and Eikels 2).

2. For representative examples, see Mercer; Fuchs; Fast.

3. Brandstetter 178; Palmer 341; Hamera 40–41.

4. Samson also adopts Paganini as a paradigm in his discussion of virtuosity.

5. Brown notes that transatlantic touring "picaninny choruses" were dialogically linked to the working child of industrial England through an undifferentiated comparison of all exploitative labor to chattel slavery, suggesting that "the appeal of the scampering, resilient black children on stage was perhaps that it brought an imagined health to the bodies of the factory children" (*Babylon Girls* 42). That appeal may also have been nostalgic. With the coupling of blackness and childhood coded as doubly "primitive," these laboring youngsters may have also conjured a longing for the putatively carefree days of the agrarian past or for the sunny climes of English colonies in the global South, where dark-skinned children and their parents also toiled.

6. Taylorism is the ostensibly scientific system devised by Frederick Taylor in 1911 for managing work. Its key features include time-motion studies, task allocation, and standardization of tools.

7. Virno's use of "servile virtuosity" is multifaceted; outside the post-Fordist context, the phrase conjures a century and a half of American racialized performance and spectatorship that turned on spectacles of black "servility," most notably minstrelsy, the corked-up parody of black vernacular dance that was, in turn, executed by black performers themselves to forge a living out of the genres of public performance available to them. Jackson's explicit incorporation of tropes of African American vernacular dance also spoke back to this very different history of "servile virtuosity."

8. Doray enumerates the differences between Taylorism and Fordism.

9. Pound's racism, the relationship between the "swing and exuberance" of jazz and industry discussed by Savran, and industrialization as a tool of hegemonic whitening are linked in the poet's observation that "[m]odern man can live and should live in his cities and machine shops with the same kind of swing and exuberance that the savage is supposed to have in his forest" (qtd. in McCarren 134).

10. Brown argues that racialized gender techniques underpin modern dance from its inception: "The mothers of modern dance shaped their sexual mysticism from Orientalist fantasies, spun from the hootchy-cootchy dancers on the midway fairgrounds" (*Babylon Girls* 157).

11. Connections between the chorus girl and industrialization involve more than the repertoire. In one case, John Tiller, a bankrupt English industrialist, and his wife opened a school to train chorines, giving girls an alternative to factory work (Brown, "From the Point of View" 165; Glenn 176, 178).

12. In addition to racialized preindustrial nostalgia, the 1930s brought a hardening of genre divisions separating white modern dancers, especially those active on the political left, from white culture-industry professionals often characterized as apolitical. These divisions obscured larger relationships between dance and specific ideologies of work, as well as all dancers' rhetorical and social authority as workers. One lasting legacy of these divisions is the paucity of critical attention paid to contemporary popular performers, and virtuosos in particular, as clarifying examples of "virtuous" workers. Franko and Graff provide a fuller history of these divisions and their consequences.

13. The trope of the human motor has fared no better than concert dance. Rabinbach suggests that the human motor has largely disappeared as a meaningful heuristic, along with the "work-centered society" from which it arose, writing, "With the declining significance of industrial work as a paradigm of human activity and modernity, the body no longer represents the triumph of an old order of productivism" (300). He is both right and premature. The human motor may have vanished from the intellectual frameworks of scientists and social reformers, but it never left the stage.

14. See also Brown, "From the Point of View."

15. Though a complete survey of Jackson's work between 1983 and 1988 exceeds the scope of this essay, note that many of his films are explicitly nostalgic for periods rooted firmly in the heyday of American urban industrialism. For example, *Thriller*'s 1950s teen romance/horror scenography of postwar prosperity becomes a landscape of the vaguely postindustrial uncanny: darkened hulks of buildings, vacant lots, deserted streets. Even the "moonwalk" has an air of nostalgia about it: a reference to a now bygone era characterized by a triumphal coupling of scientific and manufacturing prowess, despite the fact that the actual move is evocative more of a conveyor belt than of weightlessness.

16. Astaire and Kelly were themselves quoting the movement styles of African American predecessors and contemporaries (Gottschild 32–34).

17. Jackson's well-documented borrowing of steps from predecessors and street dancers can be productively explored using embodied theories of intellectual property. As Kraut demonstrates, these theories, including the parameters for acceptable "stealing [of] steps," enabled African American dancers to negotiate authorship in the context of segregation and before dance obtained copyright protection, in 1976 (179).

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